

The Impact of the Coup in Myanmar on Religious Freedom
Testimony for the Commission on International Religious Freedom
February 8, 2023
Priscilla Clapp
U.S. Institute of Peace

Introduction

The military coup of February 1, 2021 plunged Myanmar into nationwide chaos and indiscriminate violence by military and police against the civilian population. Two years later the country is essentially lawless, and conflict between the military and a variety of armed opposition forces has spread across much of the country, with the most intense fighting taking place in both the heartland, where most ethnic Bama Buddhist majority is concentrated, and in select peripheral areas populated by minority ethnic groups practicing a variety of religions. Under these circumstances it is difficult to distinguish religious discrimination or persecution from the general denial of all freedoms by the coup regime and its general animosity toward ethnic minorities and civilian opposition. The ferocity of its attacks on the civilian population appears to be targeted on all religions suspected of supporting or harboring resistance forces.

The essential question, therefore, is what the impact on religious freedom would be should the coup regime's effort to reimpose military rule succeeds. There is ample evidence from their statements and actions to suggest that all religious freedom in Myanmar, including that of some Buddhists, would suffer severely at the hands of a highly conservative ethnic Bama leadership, practicing its own cult of militarized Buddhism and intent on imposing its radical beliefs and prejudices on the entire population.

Because other speakers on today's panel represent several ethnic and religious minorities and can describe their experiences better than I, my testimony will focus especially on the wider conflict environment, the history of military oppression, and restrictions on Buddhist religious expression deemed a threat to the military. It will begin by describing the effects of the coup on the country as a whole and the hardship it has brought to members of all three major religions – Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist -- at the hands of the military since the coup. It will then discuss the characteristics of the coup leaders, particularly with regard to their [weaponization of religion](#). Finally, it will explore the likely outcome for religious freedom in Myanmar should the coup succeed in restoring harsh military rule to the country.

General background

Upon wresting power in the military coup, the generals immediately arrested and jailed the top leaders, cabinet ministers, and other senior officials of the elected civilian government and proceeded to erase all the political, social, and economic reforms instituted during ten years of

relative liberalization from 2011 to 2021. The civilian population was instantly consigned to strict controls over all aspects of life, including religion.

The coup and its threat of a return to military government was met by fierce and determined opposition across most of the country, including many religious clerics, particularly in urban centers. When police failed to quell the mass peaceful demonstrations, they began to use increasingly brutal and indiscriminate violence against the demonstrators, even employing snipers shooting to kill. Shocked by the sheer violence of the military response to the demonstrations, youth groups decided to take up arms themselves to protect civilians opposed to the coup. Those in the opposition who had fled to safety in areas controlled by ethnic armed groups were provided military training and equipment and, in some cases, invited to join these sub-state standing armies in their decades-long battles with the Myanmar military.

In the weeks and months after the coup, various elements of the opposition developed organized identities: such as the Committee Representing the Pyithu Hluttaw/Parliament (CRPH) for the elected political leaders, the Civil Defense Movement (CDM) for the striking civil servants, the General Strike Committee (GSC), and various ethnic minority political parties and civil society organizations. Leaders from these groups quickly came together in the National Unity Consultative Committee (NUCC) and the National Unity Government (NUG) – the most diverse governing bodies in the history of Burma -- to formulate plans for an alternative democratic federal government.

The coup regime reacted to these developments with even greater ferocity, extending their brutality against various ethnic armed groups and civilian populations whom they suspected of harboring and aiding the resistance. As the armed civilian groups of the resistance grew in number and capability, their hit and run tactics took an increasingly deadly toll on the junta's ground forces, especially in the heartland where the military had previously drawn its support. In response, the generals began assaulting civilian population centers from a safe distance with heavy artillery and aerial bombardment and employing scorched earth strategies, displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians.

Two years into the post-coup conflict, the country is engulfed in warfare and lawlessness. Some areas along the Thai and Chinese borders have become sizeable havens for Chinese criminal networks preying on victims across the Asian region and beyond.

The Impact on Religious Freedom

In its campaign against the resistance, the junta is deliberately torching residential areas, killing and displacing hundreds of thousands of civilian bystanders and looting homes and other facilities in order to deprive the opposition of material support and to terrorize the population into submission. These attacks have been concentrated on the country's center and peripheral ethnic states, such as Karen, Karenni, Mon, Shan, Kachin, Chin, and Rakhine, where ethnic armies have joined the wider resistance against the reimposition of military government.

Religious figures and facilities have not been spared from assault by the junta military, although the patterns of attack suggest that violence against religion per se has been motivated more by military considerations than by prejudice against particular religions. In other words, military commanders undoubtedly see religious leaders and facilities as sources of support and safe haven for the resistance forces. Furthermore, all three major religions – Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim – have been more or less equally targeted by military assault on the opposition.

Preliminary (unpublished) studies currently underway in major conflict areas as a means of documenting military atrocities for purposes of later accountability cite numerous attacks by military, police, and related militias on Christian pastors, churches, and schools, Buddhist monks and monasteries, and Muslim imams and mosques, in which they are treated with the same deadly brutality being applied to other civilian targets. Military ground forces will often use Christian and Buddhist buildings as shelters for their own troops, looting and torching them as they retreat.

Buddhists themselves – not only from the Bama ethnic majority but also from other ethnicities - have been deeply affected by the coup to the extent that the military leaders over the years have gradually “weaponized” Buddhism as part of their justification for maintaining strict control over the country’s governance. Portraying Christian and Muslim religions as examples of foreign interference and threats to the country that must be suppressed, military leaders have propagated a radical form of ethnic Bama Buddhist nationalism. Over time, an extremist minority of the population that adheres to this justification for military rule has become the base of support for the military political party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). The USDP incorporated this radical version of Buddhist nationalism into its campaign slogans for the 2020 elections and lost badly in the NLD landslide. In the wake of the coup, a number of prominent monks came out as staunch supporters of the military leaders, promoting violence against the resistance and encouraging their followers among the monkhood to take up arms themselves against perceived political opponents. They preach that the coup was necessary to save the country from becoming an Islamic state and that the military chief is the protector of the Myanmar’s “race and religion”, meaning Bama Buddhist nationalism.

Because the large majority of Myanmar’s Buddhists have rejected this cooptation of Buddhism by the military, it has created deep division inside Buddhist religion in Myanmar, setting Buddhists against each other. Since the coup, this religious division has turned violent. As in previous rebellions against military rule in Myanmar, especially the Saffron Revolution of 2007, most monks remain on the side of the people against military brutality and excessive mistreatment of the civilian population. They adhere to the peaceful tenets of Buddhism and openly side with those opposing the coup. In response, the junta regime has encouraged its supporters among extremist monks and Buddhist nationalists to form a particularly violent militia called Pyu Saw Htee to fight against resistance forces in the heartland, aiming especially at monks and monasteries. Dozens of monks have been detained and killed and some 100 Buddhist religious buildings, including 20 monasteries in Magway and Sagaing, have been destroyed. [Prominent monks, such as Myawaddy Sayadaw, have been arrested.](#)

Even as the junta's armed forces are demolishing religious targets in conflict areas, the coup's mastermind General Min Aung Hlaing often participates in ostentatious displays of respect for both Buddhist and Christian religious holidays and ritual, attempting to coopt top religious leaders into support for the coup. Most recently he conferred a number of high awards on senior Buddhist monks and Roman Catholic Cardinal Bo in widely publicized ceremonies.

Conflict Victimizing Religion

In assessing the effect of the coup on religious freedom, it is difficult to distinguish between religion and ethnicity. The ethnic minority areas most closely associated with the anti-coup resistance in collaboration with local civilian defense forces are Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, and Rakhine states where the majority of the country's Christians and Muslims reside. These areas appear to have all been targeted for attack by the military because of their collaboration with the civilian opposition and their ongoing wars against the military, and not necessarily as a campaign against minority religions per se, even though some of the victims may see a religious motivation.

- In Chin State military forces have burned and desecrated significant churches and killed a number of pastors in attacks perceived by locals as deliberate oppression of Christian communities.
- In Kachin State Christian religious activity has been suppressed and land owned by Christians has been expropriated by Buddhists, as in the past. In December 2022, the prominent Kachin Baptist reverend Dr. Hkalam Samson was detained and charged of unlawful associations; he has yet to be released and his whereabouts are uncertain.
- In Karenni State Christian ceremonies and gatherings have been similarly suppressed by the junta regime and Christians traveling within the state are regularly searched and questioned about their travel plans, and churches and Christian charities have been attacked, killing people sheltering inside.
- In Karen State there has been less targeting of churches and Christians, probably due to the larger degree of control over local administration achieved by the local Karen administration over the years. Fighting in both Karenni and Karen States, however, has been especially fierce because they have provided safe haven to many military defectors and resistance fighters from the center of the country.
- In Rakhine State ongoing conflict between the Arakan Army and the military, both of which are predominantly Buddhist, has brought new conflict to Muslim communities at the hands of the junta and foreclosed on any near-term possibility of returning the million or so Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh. To the extent that the Arakan Army has been able to take control of local administration in northern areas of the state, the threat of communal hostilities between Buddhists and Muslims has receded compared with previous years, despite military attempts to stoke religious tension. Conditions remain tense throughout the state, however, with the military effectively blocking freedom of movement on major roads and waterways, thereby seriously restricting the delivery of medical and food assistance. The impact of these blockades has taken a

particularly serious toll on northern Rakhine Rohingya villages in Maungdaw and Buthidaung, where villagers are confined largely to their villages and homes by military travel restrictions and land mines along the roads. The Hindu communities in Rakhine have also suffered under military repression. Some fled with the Rohingya to Bangladesh in 2017.

- In central parts of the country, which are predominately Buddhist, post-coup military violence against perceived opposition has been specifically targeted against Buddhist monasteries, monks, and their followers, who openly associate with opponents of the coup. Much of the most brutal military violence against the civilian population during the past two years has taken place in the ethnic Bama Buddhist heartland, from which the military has traditionally drawn its support. The level of military violence and brutality against the largely Buddhist civilian opposition in this part of the country can clearly be said to endanger Buddhist religious freedom. Some Buddhist anti-coup supporters are reported to be reconsidering their religious devotion.

Longstanding Religious Discrimination by the Burmese Military

On the whole, however, aside from exacerbating the deep division within Buddhism that has been brewing for years, it is difficult to separate religious freedom from other freedoms as a particular victim of the coup. Religious freedom is, nonetheless, a victim of decades long military rule in which religion has been used to divide the population and subjugate minorities. The prime example is the treatment of Rohingya, who have been singled out by the military as foreign and unwelcome despite their long history of as an integral part of western Myanmar. Their isolation began during the Ne Win years and became intense during the Than Shwe regime, when the military began to demonize them as an external threat to the country. The generals proceeded to militarize Rakhine State and foment tensions between the Rakhine Buddhist population and their Rohingya neighbors. Military governments also marginalized other Muslims and Christians, placing obstacles in the way of religious practice and forcing subjugated ethnic and religious minorities to convert to Buddhism in order to receive basic services.

Militarization of religion has a long history with Myanmar's military rulers who, beginning with General Ne Win, have maintained that Christianity and Islam were introduced into the country by British colonialists as a deliberate means of suppressing the Bama Buddhist majority. Today's military leaders and their extremist supporters have added the Organization for Islamic Cooperation to the list of foreign entities promoting an Islamist take-over. As a reaction to their obsessive paranoia about malign foreign influence corrupting the country, previous military governments have applied the antidote of "Burmanization", with Buddhism as the only official religion, marginalizing and at times even outlawing the practice of other religions. Churches and mosques are generally required to seek official permission to hold services, which is often denied. Although these restrictions were eased during the NLD government, between 2016 and 2021, they have become more severe since the coup. Citizens of other races and religions are systematically denied equal citizenship, as well as equal economic and political

opportunity. Membership for Christians in the military and civil service is strictly limited and for Muslims entirely forbidden. Of course, these restrictions do not apply to Buddhists.

Prospects for the Future

It is clear that religious freedom in Myanmar has no future should the coup regime succeed in its quest to reinstitute harsh military control over the country's governance. Army commander and head of the junta regime Gen. Min Aung Hlaing and other leaders of the junta are conservative, mostly from the Bama ethnic majority, and practice a radical form of Buddhism that defies the traditional Buddhist respect for living creatures and the natural order. They see political liberalization, efforts to reduce military control of the country's political and economic institutions, and modern social trends as unwelcome foreign influence and interference. They consider non-Buddhist religions to be a form of foreign intrusion and are determined to impose their culture on the rest of the country. It is perhaps a telling sign of their vision for the future that the campaign slogans of the military political party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) call for strict conformance with Buddhism and paint other religions as foreign.

During the two-year post-coup period, the resistance movement has not withered, as happened with past rebellions, but has continued to expand, becoming more organized and effective in fighting military control. On the second anniversary of the coup, the top General Min Aung Hlaing himself admitted that the military now controls less than half the country, in explaining why he had decided to extend martial law for another six months and delay his vaunted elections until they could be held safely across the entire country.

The resistance – which calls their movement the Spring Revolution – promises a new federal democracy that will revolutionize the social and political order by instilling equality, pluralism, and tolerance for diversity and overturning the ethno-religious and other divisions spawned by military leaders to ensure control over a divided population. It is a tall order that could take a generation to become reality, but a wide majority of the Myanmar population considers this a more promising future for the country than a return to governance under the thumb of an unreconstructed military leadership.

[Author's note: The details in this testimony draw heavily on an analytic study of the coup and religious freedom produced very recently by Vimutti, a publication compiled weekly by local observers and political analysts. Because few other informed sources are yet available on this subject, this Vimutti study can be accessed in the [attached PDF](#). Although it is marked as private, the author has approved its release to the commission. Those seeking greater detail and history of religious persecution by the military in Myanmar would find the Vimutti analysis very informative.]